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ABSTRACT

The question of how important place is to learning is one that has fallen in and out of vogue during the past 40 years. Despite frequent statements of its importance, there has been a continual lack of attention to the physical environment of adult education. Under the leadership of John Becker, an architect from Cincinnati, the Adult Education Association's Commission on Architecture published "Architecture for Adult Education" in 1953. Individuals' reactions to their environment have often been thought to be idiosyncratic. However, a preliminary investigation seems to suggest a continuum in individual response to the physical attributes of the environment. Research has not yet clearly delineated what aspects of the environment can be controlled nor how they should be controlled. Karen and Jim Leed, two architects from Cincinnati, have recently published "Building for Adult Learning," and appear to be well versed in adult learning theory. They state that an adult learning facility should meet basic comfort needs, feature and reinforce a nonjudgmental climate of trust and sharing, maximize social contact and exchange of information, meet the learners' highest expectations of quality, and truly inspire learners to greater achievement. Sporadic, individual efforts need to be orchestrated so that national attention and funding can be sought to support continued work to answer the questions arising from a thoughtful consideration of how adults are influenced by their environment. (Sixteen references are cited and a comprehensive bibliography on place and learning is appended. (CML)

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The importance of place to adult learning

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

The question of how important the place is to learning is one that has fallen in and out of vogue over the past forty years. Currently, there is a minor resurgence of concern for the places of adult learning, but no organized efforts to research this matter are apparent. However, there have been two periods in the history of adult education as an organized enterprise in the United States when substantial attention was paid to the consideration of how physical setting impacted adult learning. During both of these periods, the professional adult education organization at a national level spearheaded this inquiry.

Recently, the question of adult learning and physical space has been considered at Syracuse University by Dr. Roger Hiemstra and Dr. Richard Vosko. In a doctoral dissertation, Vosko (1984), found that while "adults in this study perceived and reacted to the instructional settings in many different ways ... people's feelings and reactions concerning physical environments were more important than the actual instructional settings used ... " (p. 218). This view that the relation of person to environment is almost unique to the person is also supported by other researchers. Dunn and Dunn (1979) emphatically stated

> Based on observations, interviews and experimental studies conducted since 1967, it has become apparent that regardless of their age, ability, socioeconomic status, or achievement level, individuals respond uniquely to their immediate environment. (p. 239)

Fitt (1974) concluded from her qualitative studies that "Any spatial transaction between an individual and his environment

depends on two variables: the individual's idiosyncratic use of space and the environment's structuring." (p. 617). But what if this interaction is indeed idiosyncratic? Would it not then have to be relegated to the realm of extraneous variables over which one has no real control? Rather than expend effort on the question of how to use this variable to enhance learning, should the whole matter simply be left to chance?

Certainly, this seems to be the attitude of some adult educators. As long ago as 1958, Malcolm Knowles and Herbert Clark conducted a survey and found that by and large adult education was taking place in whatever facilities were available with little attention paid to designing space to accommodate adult learners. This was the case even though the Adult Education Association of the USA had established a Commission on Architecture in February, 1953. This Commission was charged with "examining the implications of adult education for school architecture and of devising a strategy for disseminating recommendations to appropriate local people." (Knowles in Fulton, 1989a, p.1). During the decade of its existence, The Commission on Architecture published two monographs and conducted a national conference. One of the strengths of this body was its heterogeneous composition. Professors of adult education joined with architects, public school administrators, social agency officials, and religious leaders to report how architecture might be better planned for the needs of adult learning. As one of the best funded commissions and committees of the national

organization with specific financial support from the Fund for Adult Education, this Commission looked at the question from an architectural framework where the learner was secondary to the place. Its first publication in 1956, Architecture for Adult Education, is filled with sections titled Groundwork, Framework, Superstructure, and a menu of types of buildings. No particular attention is given to the person, but rather, "the program comes first--the building to encompass it afterward." (p. 6).

It was an architect who led this Commission--John Becker of Cincinnati, Ohio. Thus, an architectural point of view seems wholly understandable. A study of this commission, Adult Places for Learning: the decade of the 1950's, (Fulton, 1989a), concludes that Becker's forceful style of leadership was both a blessing and a curse to the commission. Much of the work accomplished by this commission can be directly attributed to Becker's singular focus; however, his autocratic style may have also narrowed the scope that the commission took in addressing this question. Perhaps, due to Becker's leadership, his claims that the conference at Purdue University in 1958 was "a conference of national scope" (1960, p.156) or that architecture for adult education was "widely acknowledged as the fastest growing movement in American learning." (1960, p. 156) were simply the dreams of a handful of men rather than the reality of the adult education enterprise. Just as people sometimes do, the Commission on Architecture gloried in its heyday; then it quietly passed from existence after spending the last of its money in the

early 1960s.

About a decade later, a new look at adult learning and space came about. By then, the national adult education organization had undergone changes and in the early 1970s a new commission was established--Commission on Planning Adult Learning Systems, Facilities, and Environments. Assuming that "the development of learning environments especially for adults has been neglected and research in planning such environments is fragmented and minimal" (MS, 1972, Abstract), this Commission attempted to organize the body of known knowledge to inspire needed additional research. Chaired by Sally White of City University of New York, this Commission published Physical Criteria for Adult Learning Environments in October, 1972. The Educational Research Information Clearinghouse (ERIC) was used to disseminate this report. One of the main strengths of this publication was its compilation of a 60-item bibliography; however, it is most often quoted for the emphatic statement:

> ...general estimates indicate that while about seventy-five percent of learning is accounted for by motivation, meaningfulness, and memory, the remaining twenty-five percent of learning is dependent upon the effects of the physical environment. In general, therefore, the success of adult education is dependent to a considerable extent upon the facilities and environment provided for the learner. (p. 2)

Unfortunately, there is no substantive documentation for this claim. Nor are there other publications of the Commission on Planning Adult Learning Systems, Facilities, and Environments that expand upon, support, or document this research claim.

While not particularly scientifically rigorous in her writing, Sally White, none-the-less, did challenge the view of the idiosyncratic relationship between the person and the environment. Further, she and her Commission refocused the attention from the architecture to the learning. Many writers made quick mention of the physical environment in terms of comfort, safety, or attractiveness which it added to the learning. White, however, placed the physical setting at the core of the learning experience.

What has happened as a result of these two Commissions? Unfortunately, very little has really resulted. The literature still has passing claims to the importance of physical settings. "Physical is important. ... Togetherness is important" claims Myles Horton, one of the most respected practitioners of adult learning (Conti & Fellenz, 1986, p. 8). However, "We believe much more needs to be known about the adult learning environment. In fact, physical features appear to have been primarily ignored in the adult education literature." (Vosko & Hiemstra, 1988, p. 186). Generally, the potential is recognized; however, the research still is lacking. As Brockett stated, "This topic has been virtually untouched by researchers in the field to date and has the potential to provide new and valuable insights into adult learning processes." (June 12, 1989, personal correspondence).

Why this continued acknowledgement of its importance, yet the continual lack of attention to the physical environment? One reason may be the continued perception that a person's response

to the environment is indeed idiosyncratic. However, a recent preliminary investigation found a continuum in individual response to the physical attributes of the environment. While generalizability is questioned, Fulton (1989b) found that irrespective of age or gender, individuals generally used both adaptive and adoptive responses to physical environments. In given situations, participants reported both behaviors that would change the environment and behaviors that would accept the limitations of the environment. Vosko found that his participants, including instructors and class members, were "tolerant of the settings as they existed" (1985 p. 222). Both studies support that there are commonalties in responses that make the physical environment a matter for attention.

Few individuals would say that the physical environment is the most important or even one of the most important variables in adult learning. For the present, Sally White's claim of twenty-five percent must remain simply an unsubstantiated claim. Vosko's (1985) study seems to draw a realistic parameter for the physical attributes:

> Although many adults in the study agreed that the setting could make a difference in terms of the classroom atmosphere, most indicated that the physical space was not as important as the subject matter, the presentation of the instructor, and the interaction with other learners. (p. 222)

A useable framework for adult educators in approaching the question of environment and learning can be found in Weinstein's (1981) call for " 'environmental competence'--the awareness of

the physical environment and its impact and the ability to use or change the environment to suit one's needs." (p. 17). Rather than relegate the environment as an uncontrollable variable, Weinstein (1981) states from her research and her interpretation of the research of others:

> The first premise states that the physical setting of the classroom is an integral element of the learning environment. Although it does not "teach", the classroom setting facilitates certain behaviors and hinders others. The second premise is that studies of classroom environment must take into account the social and instructional context ... what David (1979) has called the functional environment ... the third assumption is that there is no ideal physical setting that will satisfy all learning situations ... the last premise ... the physical setting of a classroom constitutes an external condition that must be arranged as systematically as the other elements of the stimulus situation. (pp. 12 - 13)

While acknowledging the personal aspect of individual-environment interaction in her third premise, Weinstein admonishes educators to take charge of what can be controlled.

The crux of the current problem is that research has not yet clearly delineated what can be controlled nor how it should be controlled. Adult educators must be careful in making assumptions about the desirability of certain physical attributes and the undesirability of others. For example, it is reasonable to assume that overcrowding is an undesirable attribute for learning environments. However, Aiello (1976) found that older adults felt cozier, friendlier, and less afraid in crowded rooms than in uncrowded rooms. Thus, some crowding may be beneficial to learning by older adults. Perhaps, misery does love company!

Adult educators must take off the blinders that are apparent

when one only reviews his or her particular field for information. Two recent attempts at reviewing the literature have, in fact, purposefully gone "primarily outside of educational circles" (Vosko & Hiemstra, 1988, p. 186) in order to present a more global picture of the relationship. Fulton (1989c) in attempting to conduct a comprehensive review of the literature on this subject, "... considered the fields of psychology (especially environmental psychology), sociology, architecture, design and education (especially adult learning)." (p. 2).

Perhaps, one of the most enlightening publications to address this question appeared recently. Two Cincinnati architects, Karen Leed and Jim Leed, authored Building for Adult Learning in 1987. This book was sponsored by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the University of Cincinnati. Impetus for considering how facilities relate to an adult's ability to learn is again coming from architects just as it did in the 1950s; however, this time it appears that the architects are well versed in adult learning theory. Using a systems design approach, the Leeds clearly equate the learner and the place along with the content as three variables in the learning equation. In the thirty years since Becker's original work, the concept of architecture has greatly expanded and the Leeds clearly incorporate an awareness of building exterior, building interior, media, and support elements as legitimate architectural

concerns. What is very valuable in this book is the conceptualization of a five-step building block model to demonstrate the relationship of facility to learning. The Leeds (1987) state that the learning facility should:

1) meet basic physiological needs or "Creature Comforts".
2) feature and reinforce a non-judgmental climate of trust and sharing.
3) maximize social contact and exchange of information.
4) meet the learners' highest expectations of quality
5) truly inspire learners to greater achievements

(p. 11)

One could argue that the pendulum has swung full circle. In the early 1950s an architect from Cincinnati, Ohio led the movement to make architecture a central concern for adult learning. His work led to the publication of two monographs and to a national conference in conjunction with the opening of the Adult Education Center at Purdue University. In the late 1980s two Cincinnati architects have again contributed a major work to the field that encourages building for adult learning. What is necessary in the field of adult education is an eye-opening that while not the most important question for research the relation of place to learning is, never-the-less, one worthy of an organized research effort. Sporadic, individual efforts need to be orchestrated so that national attention and funding can be sought again to support continued work to answer the questions arising from a thoughtful consideration of how adults are influenced by the environment. Hopefully, some day a historical review of adult education will echo Dr. Hal Beder's comment, " ... we sometimes forget the significance of the place. You did

not." (August 4, 1989, personal correspondence)

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